

GENDERS, RACES, AND  
RELIGIOUS CULTURES IN  
MODERN AMERICAN  
POETRY, 1908–1934

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## *Contents*

<i>Acknowledgments</i>	<i>page</i> xi
1 Entitled new: a social philology of modern American poetry	i
2 “Corpses of poesy”: modern poets consider some gender ideologies of lyric	29
3 “Seismic orgasm”: sexual intercourse, its modern representations and politics	52
4 “HOO, HOO, HOO”: some episodes in the construction of modern male whiteness	81
5 “Darken your speech”: racialized cultural work in black and white poets	106
6 “Wondering Jews”: melting-pots and mongrel thoughts	135
<i>Notes</i>	175
<i>Works cited</i>	204
<i>Index</i>	228

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Entitled new: a social philology of modern American poetry*

It's a very long and difficult job . . . to see how, in the very detail of composition, a certain social structure, a certain history, discloses itself. This is not doing any kind of violence to that composition. It's precisely finding ways in which forms and formations, in very complex ways, interact and interrelate.

Raymond Williams (1989), *The Politics of Modernism*, 185

This book situates itself within modernist studies, trying one way of relating modernism to modernities.<sup>1</sup> Propelled by the scintillating critical practices from feminist, ethnic, and other materialist critics and poetic communities, my reading of poetry within modernist studies probes works of art by people struggling with formations entitled new – New Woman, New Black, New Jew.<sup>2</sup> Part of the “newness” of modernity lies in its representation of the urgencies and contradictions of these modern subjectivities. By a method I call social philology, I propose a reactivation of close reading to examine in poetry the textual traces and discursive manifestations of a variety of ideological assumptions, subject positions, and social concepts concerning gender, race, and religious culture. It is the purpose of this book to offer reading strategies that can mediate between the historical terrain and the intimate poetic textures of a work.

Certainly the materials and themes of poems involve discursive elements (allusions, diction, tropes) and depict issues traceable to particular social subjects. But this book will also propose that modern poets construct cultural narratives and articulate social debates around emblems and idioms of subjectivity, within the texture and using the resources of poetry – line break, stanza break and other segmentivities, caesurae, visual image and semantic image, etymology, phonemes, lateral associations, crypt words, puns – including translingual puns, its own particular genres, the diegesis with its actors and pronouns, and the whole text with its speaker or persona.

Within modernity, some people entitle themselves “New,” articulating entitlement, the right of claim to full personhood, full citizenship, and some control of their deeds. These “new” social subjectivities engage with various projects of emancipation and possibility, hoping that in modernity there can be a “qualitative transcendence,” a time “better than what has gone before” (Osborne 1995, 11, 10). “New entitlements” are formations compounded of social claims for change in the legal, political and economic status of a given group that, while incomplete in the time frame this book concerns (about 1908–34), were nonetheless motivating and transformative, with many cultural implications.<sup>3</sup> New Woman, New Black, New Jew constitute emergent formations and diverse sites of conflict and affirmation in the modernizing projects of modernity. The subject locations entitled “new” sum up a considerable amount of social desire, political debate, and intellectual ferment, contributing, for instance, to passionate politics of rectification in the suffrage or the anti-lynching campaigns. These new subjectivities are also spoken in and through literature.

The formations entitled new do not begin simultaneously: New Woman is talked of before “New Negro” and is reemergent during the teens and twenties; New Jew, a person modernizing Judaism through nineteenth century Enlightenment thinking (*Haskalah*), is still active in the immigrant populations in the U.S. and Britain. These liberatory discourses put clear pressure on the manifests of a United States democracy: the New Black in emerging from slavery and serfdom, the New Woman with claims for suffrage and for sexual and professional independence, and the New Jew, provoking, as did other immigrant populations, many anxieties about difference and the issue of surfeit and containment of access to the United States. The formations New Woman, New Black, New Jew also engage with, debate, and help give shape to discourses of maleness/masculinity/manhood, homosexuality, virility, whiteness and “souls of white folk” (in Du Bois’ phrase), pre-Enlightenment Jew, and Christian/Gentile; these formations also emphatically occur in modern poetry and are often part of the entitlement of poets (Du Bois 1920, 29).

One might take some closely fitted dates in the 1890s to be symbolic indicators of these entitlements and their debates.<sup>4</sup> The crisis about sexuality and gender, about forms of masculinity in debate was focused in 1895, as the Oscar Wilde trial both opened and endangered debate about sexual fluidity; the so-called “invention of heterosexuality” in relation to the newly articulated homosexuality has been wittily dated, by

Jonathan Katz (1995), to 1892. Women's modernity within modernism, their social struggles and intellectual debates were focused by the term "New Woman," coined in 1894 by Ouida from a phrase by British novelist Sarah Grand, a descriptor for a variety of emancipatory reforms in the female condition: higher education, living wages, changes in marriage law, access to the professions, woman suffrage, and sometimes birth control (Fitzsimmons and Gardner 1991, vii; Tickner 1992, 3).<sup>5</sup> Indeed, by 1913, "the New Woman has been in poetry and drama and fiction for close to sixty years," and could be seen, fondly – or not – as the "Old 'New Woman'" (Kenton 1913, 154). Social and ideological struggles about elements of New Woman subjectivity and gender ideologies of masculinity as refracted in poetry are the subject of two of my chapters.<sup>6</sup>

A cluster of "incipit" dates in the 1890s marks the formation of a black modernity. One point of origin for a New Black stance within modernity and modernism was the militant campaign against lynching begun by Ida B. Wells in 1892. The debate over citizenship for Americans of African descent was focused by the Supreme Court decision of 1896, *Plessy versus Ferguson*, designating a legal second-class quasi-citizenship for those defined (no matter their visible color) as black; this decision gave forceful mandate to discrimination and racial segregation for at least another half century. Given this "dismantled Reconstruction," "the 'newness' of the New Negro, then, stemmed largely from an aggressive claim to political inclusion, economic and cultural participation, and fundamental equality" (Sanders 1996, xi). As Du Bois proposed in introducing the 1925 anthology *The New Negro* (Locke 1988), the "new" formation involved changes of consciousness and incentives to cultural production interdependent with social struggle and political agency. The "New Negro" was, as Houston Baker argues (1987, 15), a formation well underway in Booker T. Washington's 1895 Atlanta address, making the Harlem Renaissance of the 1920s the culmination of political, social and cultural debates about the status of blacks in the U.S.

This black entitlement evoked a complex of responses. A Wallace Stevens letter of 1918 shows identification with black troops leaving for World War I; he resists and consciously comments upon the patronizing attitudes of most white observers (Stevens 1966 [May 1, 1918], 209). And yet two years later, he remarks sourly of the sight of his hometown Reading, "It was much like returning from the wars and finding one's best beloved remarried to a coon" (ibid. [May 16, 1920], 219). This text indicates the difficulty Euro-Americans had in consistently acknowledging the "New Black" as social citizen. Sociologist Charles S. Johnson

remembers the postwar period as the “reassertion with vigor of the old and shaken racial theories” from the “gaudy racial philosophy” of the time immediately post-Reconstruction, allegations of the inferiority of “the Negro and other darker peoples,” restrictions of immigration, “race riots, dark foreboding prophecies of the over-running of the white race by the dark and unenlightened hordes from Asia and Africa, in Lothrop Stoddard’s [1920] *Rising Tide of Color*” (C. Johnson, in Lewis, 1994, 211, 207, 211). My two chapters involving the New Black subjectivity will discuss the poetic marks of insurgent African-American political and cultural presence in relation to Euro-American uses of racialized discourses.

African-American modernity was faced with a suppurating pseudo-science about race differences affecting at least blacks and Jews, but also Irish, Slavs, and Italians. In both Britain and the United States, immigration in the 1890s of Jews displaced by the pogroms in Russia sharpened debates about “mongrel races.” The year 1892 focused a general Gilded Age anti-Semitism because of a public health crisis in New York caused by highly contagious diseases attributed to Jewish immigrants (Markel 1997, 146–47). The New Jew, an enlightenment figure of Jewish modernity, was caught among assimilation, secularization, and a variety of Semiticized and mongrelizing discourses. For example, Ezra Pound, in a 1920 letter to William Carlos Williams, mentions “mixed race, Semitic goo,” intermingling mongrel and Jew as part of a discussion of race, poetry, and his proclaimed transnationality (Pound 1996, 38). My chapter called “Wondering Jews” discusses mongrelization, and notes the aggressive claims for order and Christian civilization that capped modernism in the late 20s and early 30s.

Modern poetries process many elements of these “new” social insurgencies involving race, gender, nationhood (and nativism), religious culture, and class. Poetry is the repository and expression of subjectivity, a site where the materials of social subjectivity are absorbed and articulated, where pronouns, personae, speaking positions are produced. Poetry does not necessarily construct a seamless subjectivity, consistent between the inside speakers and the poet’s artifact (the enounced and the enunciations), but a subjectivity whose very articulation in language reveals organized multiplicities, contradictions, and projections.<sup>7</sup> Many modern poets were fascinated with these newly entitled subjectivities; some modern poets hold these positions, some appropriate them, some struggle with them in parody and resistance, others claim them, but also critique them, and still others want to work in a contradictory site of

engagement and resistance. This book is not about a postulated fit between persons and identity. Indeed, a productive tension within the “New” social subjects between embodying group identity and enacting an individualist separation, between allegiance and resistance to category marks the work of many writers discussed here. One sees this tension in Loy’s interpretations of both the New Woman and the New Jew position, in Cullen’s negotiation with New Black. Other writers claiming some relationship to galvanic “New” subjectivities produced irruptive and grotesque identificatory works: Lindsay’s “The Congo,” Eliot’s “Sweeney Agonistes,” and Pound’s “Yiddischer Charleston Band.”

The productive and critical consolidation of a period and field of study called “modernism” during the 1940s through the 1970s or 80s was made, and was maintained as virtually gender and race exclusive (Elliott and Wallace 1994, 2, 9). This book stands with many others to demolish that inadequate paradigm. It became increasingly clear through such feminist studies as the pioneering work of Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar and work on individual authors – Jane Marcus on Woolf, Susan Stanford Friedman on H.D., Carolyn Burke on Loy, that “modernism’s stories of its own genesis” were deeply flawed by significant exclusions of women writers, and of such issues and figures as the New Woman (Ardis 1990, 2). For example, Gilbert and Gubar argue that modernism can be reconfigured around the “woman question” and around a variety of responses – they emphasize the intemperate and misogynist – to the newly emergent authority of the woman writer (Gilbert and Gubar 1988, 1989, 1994).<sup>8</sup>

Before the gynocriticism of the 1970s and 80s, we knew so little about women writers and how social differences could manifest in cultural products that much work was needed to bring women writers up to judicious and informed scrutiny. A parallel point can be made about the resurgence of cultural studies concerning ethnicity and African-American writers. As Griselda Pollock has argued, there is no linear progress out of early forms of feminist analysis, but rather a “synchronic configuration” of feminist critical practices (Pollock 1993, 100; see also Friedman 1998, 31). Gynocriticism is not an outdated or surpassed move in its goals of formal, biographical and textual recovery, nor in its goals of exploring female agency in texts and in their creation, but its critical assumptions and thus its findings have now to resist, or use with greater self-scrutiny, the gender binarism on which it was originally built. So too the tendencies in such criticism toward identificatory readings mirroring



oneself need to be tempered. Situationist reading, what Susan Friedman has called “locational feminism” will argue instead that “subjectivity is not only multiple and contradictory, but also relational” and that any “axes of identity are not equally foregrounded in every situation” (Friedman 1998, 18, 22, 23).<sup>9</sup> “Gendering modernism” is one crucial act in producing some enriched and transformed literary histories of modernism. Yet one might want to distinguish between the interpretative finding of a “female modernism” and the interpretative position held in this book exploring diversity within modernism by encouraging feminist reception and gender-oriented analyses of all producers.

However, why would one want only to “gender” modernism, without “sexing” it, “racializing” it, “Semiticizing” it, “classing” it? While gender has certainly done powerful service, it is not alone as an ideological nexus and materialist and culturalist practice. Indeed, modernist studies, or modernism under the rubric of cultural studies, forwards contextualizations of all kinds. These involve a variety of critical engagements. A critic might discuss the materiality of texts, involving bibliographical and editorial studies, construction of editions and the various presentations of text as a physical (and aural) object.<sup>10</sup> There are strong and widespread critical practices contextualizing the nature of specific works – their interior themes, images, narratives, and the social, personal, historical debates they encode, pursue, and hint at; this is an engagement generally most comfortable with prose fiction and its poetics.<sup>11</sup> Finally, critics have studied institutions and interactions enabling the short- and long-term production, reception, and dissemination of texts – including such modes and mechanisms of literary assertion as muses, geniuses, groups, manifestoes, editing practices, publishing houses, “little” magazines, avant-gardes, and critical interventions.<sup>12</sup> For example, poet-critics writing from the contemporary practice of language poetry (and its surround) have, in their critical writings, developed acute analyses of the politics of literary reputation, of dissemination and its institutions, and of the forging, stabilizing, and destabilizing of a literary hegemony.<sup>13</sup> Critics have recently studied the nature and social control of “canon” and “cultural capital” in the politics of reception, have discussed the various “social transactions” surrounding the reception of a text, and have scrutinized the longer-range institutions of dissemination, such as universities, anthologies, translation practices, critical schools, “masterpieces,” and critical texts such as this one (Kalaidjian 1989, xii).<sup>14</sup>

The potential weak point of any kind of contextualization is its thin textual specificity. Contextualization and cultural studies sometimes do

not resist an extractive attitude to texts and may elide or erase the specificity of linguistic texture. This issue is particularly acute and meaningful where poetry is concerned. There the challenge is both to contextualize poems and to mediate between their historical and social dimensions and their textual specificity, so that a critical, culturalist reading attends to the detail and can analyze dissonances, slippages, affirmations, and quirks within a range of verbal acts from discourses and semantic layering to the phoneme. That is, one wants any study of poetry to engage with poetry as such – its conventions and textual mechanisms, its surfaces and layers – and not simply to regard the poetic text as an odd delivery system for ideas and themes. As Jean-Jacques Lecercle reminds us in his theory of the opacities of the “remainder” (1990, 47), there are culturally evocative, apparently excessive materials beyond the semantic meaning created by a word.<sup>15</sup> These ideas about the density and layeredness of texts point to a post-formalist, yet formally articulate cultural analysis of poetry.

There are readers of poetry who have pioneered the kind of analysis affirmed in this study. Certain critics, notably Jonathan Monroe and Jerome McGann, and sometimes Marjorie Perloff have found in the texture of a text questions about the “interplay of lyric poetry” with its historical situation – for example, the technological revolution of the twentieth century itself impressed through advertising images on a community of consumers (Perloff 1991, xii and 1986, on Oppen). Discussing the prose poem as a genre, Monroe has located the ways its language “does not serve merely to ‘reflect’ ideological and material struggles in society; it is itself the very locus of such struggles” (1987, 29). Jerome McGann has continuously proposed a subtle, exacting “materialist hermeneutics” showing, for example, “how the *Cantos* executes its historical, political, and ideological meanings” in part through the rich allusiveness of its material text (McGann 1991, 130).

Certain poet-critics have long offered post-formalist contextualizing theories of the poetic text. Barrett Watten has foregrounded the idea of a cultural poetics as a reading and production strategy. In *Total Syntax*, he proposed to reread and reposition Russian formalism, claiming it back from neo-formalist New Criticism for a critical practice of articulating the relation of text to context through formal inventions and precisions (Watten 1985). He also calls for a thoroughgoing examination of the meanings and definition of the phrase “cultural poetics” in its potential and implications both for producers and for consumers and critics of poetry (Watten 1997, 4). Watten also introduced the suggestive coinage

“social formalism” in the title of an 1987 article, locating how “the social exists in and through its [textual] forms” (Watten 1987, 370). Charles Bernstein has articulated similar propositions, so that “the project of particularizing, historicizing, and ideologizing the interpretation of poetry must especially, even primarily, address itself to the stylistic features of the work”; this would involve a way of reading “the formal dynamics of a poem as communicative exchanges, as socially addressed, and as ideologically explicit” (Bernstein 1992, 221, 218, and also in Bernstein 1999). He too sums this up as a “social formalist” position (Bernstein 1999, 251).

We can appreciate that the study of literature must involve the dialectical analyses of texts and “social processes” intersecting in their material, ideological, discursive, and historical import (Wolff 1990, 110). This is the proposition of the anthology *Aesthetics and Ideology*, edited by George Levine (1994): to develop – citing Stephen Greenblatt – a “cultural poetics”/“poetics of culture.” Yet despite Greenblatt’s generalized use of the term poetics, poetry, with many conventional exemptions built into our sense of the genre, is rarely read with these claims in mind.<sup>16</sup> Poetry, most particularly the lyric, has generally been construed (in its university and critical reception) as opposite to society and its discourses. As a mode (and a conglomerate of genres), poetry is often positioned as untainted by the social, in pursuit of higher things, a bastion of transcendence and the aesthetic, privileged by the expression of timeless, universal emotions, set apart by specific conventions in its language, and, in its versions of romantic subjectivity, by non-participation in, non-compliance with historical debate. Poetry serves expressivist goals in which the apparently ahistorical speaking subject is explored and exposed. Culturalist readings of poetry must struggle deeply and continuously against these institutionalized paradigms concerning both the nature of poetry and its critical reception, in which poetry is widely perceived as not, or only crudely, assimilable to contextualizing critical positions. Therefore few people attempt “historicizing a poem’s deployment of artifice,” not as a formalist narrative only, nor as a social narrative only, but in some conjunction (Bernstein 1992, 221).<sup>17</sup>

These ahistorical, anti-culturalist assumptions about poetry are discussed in Theodor Adorno’s famous argument against the separation of poetry and social forms.<sup>18</sup> Adorno shows how most critics of poetry have maintained a traditional resistance to any analyses of any poetry’s political and ideological representations. Indeed, as he proposes, it has seemed critically gross to think otherwise, a symptom of a lack of refinement and

reading nuance when faced either with the finesse and charm, or with the complexity and irreducibility, of poetic texts.

Adorno's position is further complicated because he makes an argument that dialectally assimilates (and thus half-agrees with) the assumption he also questions. Thus he says indeed, yes, lyric poetry leverages you out of the real world, evoking a life free from constraint, contingency, and materiality, and, moreover, that this evocation of pure untrammelled spirit *is* its social meaning. Material constraints and the real world are "imprinted in reverse on poetry," so the poem is a site of in-gathering negativity, an other side obdurately resistant to the social claims that pressure it, yet marked by its own historicity (Adorno 1991 39/1974 58). A lyric poem is a utopian site, reacting to reification and commodification; it is a protest against the world and it foreshadows a changed world, as if a tiny post-revolutionary or predictive spot in a pre-revolutionary situation.

This towering and compelling argument for a poem's utopian Otherness, for the way it makes a social protest ontologically, by its very being-a-poem, seems curiously to argue against its real analytic propositions. The way Adorno deploys assumptions of a transcendent "beyond" of art – in the suggestive term negativity – clings to lyric and shorter poetry making it difficult to see any cultural work done by poems except a generalized resistance ("renunciation" or refus: 1991 52/1974 69). And except for something quite interesting, if also general: a use in poems of erotic narratives as encodings of social stories proposing a "free humankind" by virtue of the idealized Self-Other relations in such works, a proposition that cries out for feminist critique (1991 53/1974 71).

Reading poetry over the past fifty-plus years of literary studies in the U.S. was so thoroughly an activity mandated by the formalist elegances of New Criticism that contemporary context-oriented moves, however synoptic and brilliant, are decidedly wary of the texture and the nature of poems and are much more comfortable with narrative. Many of the people who offer materialist readings show how fiction represents historical contradictions and contesting social ideologies in clashes between characters, or in rifts and fissures in a text – positions exemplified by Raymond Williams, Jameson, Macherey, Eagleton, and Said.<sup>19</sup>

How then can one make culturalist readings of poetry? Since this question was apparently blocked by anti-contextualist strategies of close reading developed within the era of New Criticism, it appeared to some as if one needed to get "beyond new criticism" in order to engage this issue (Arac 1985, see 352, 350).<sup>20</sup> One path is a reading strategy for poetry

intertextual with philosophy, psychoanalysis, and the rejection of totalizing metaphysics in general that Richard Machin and Christopher Norris characterize by the rubric “post-structuralist readings of poetry.” In their anthology, they have also made the polemical claim against New Criticism more intense by providing readings of hyper-canonical poems. Christopher Norris emphatically rejects formalist propositions: that poetry emanates from a “sovereign” autonomous language rather than using discourses the ways other fields and arguments do, that poetry preserves a special literariness, creating “a self-sustaining allegory of aesthetic transcendence,” and that poetry occasions a transhistorical meeting place of poetic minds, a “purely synchronic cultural order” (Machin and Norris 1987, 137, 156, 139). Thus the anthology speaks for a concept of poetry as impure, historical.<sup>21</sup> This is both useful and helpful, yet a further step needs to be taken. For just rhetoric and narrative do not account for all the effects a poem may produce, and “ideology” as an imagined conglomerate speaker must still choose specific poetic means, like line break.

In an earlier anthology “beyond New Criticism,” and in the afterword, critically situating the anthology that claimed, but did not fully achieve, that move “beyond,” Jonathan Arac challenged critics to discuss ways in which poetry is related to “sociocultural codes” and called for an enhanced and strategic use of historical scholarship in criticism. Noting that rhetorical figures and genres can hardly be assumed to have transhistorical meanings or functions, he proposes the development of a “historical semiotics” bound to a Bakhtinian examination of “the historical study of the orders of language,” or “interdiscursivity” to see how poetic genre, rhetoric and textual materials relate and respond to “sociocultural codes” (1985, 350–52). Arac’s call opens the possibility of understanding poetry by an exploration of its social discourses. At the same time, one must find in these observations a way of factoring in the codes of poetry, its panoply of forms, its own generic conventions.

Hence my reading strategy does not reject the rich formal investigations and textual intimacies of New Criticism, but rather repositions them. A remark by the romanticist Susan Wolfson sums up the interests at stake: “‘close reading,’ as a practice of attention, need not be complicit with the methods and agenda of the New Criticism in which its skills were first exercised and refined”; hence she proposes to study “the construction of forms in relation to subjectivity, cultural ideology, and social circumstance” (1994, 212; 1997, 19). She means by poetic form pre-

cisely what I will propose here: “the events of form – rhyme, wordplay, syntax, and the play of the poetic line” (Wolfson 1994, 191).<sup>22</sup>

All in all, this book wants to join these and other readers “to see how, in the very detail of composition, a certain social structure, a certain history, discloses itself,” as Raymond Williams says; it wants to accomplish this task by enhancing, not draining our sense of “the composition” (Williams 1989, 185). Hence this book is animated by a specific assumption in method: social meanings and debates, textual irruptions of subjectivities, contradictory or self-consistent, must be examined not just *in* poetry but *as* poetry. I will call this attentiveness to “the events of form” – in the service of social identifications, social entitlements, and possibly ideological critique – a “social philology.”

Nothing, it has appeared, could be less appropriate as a critical technique than philology. Students of modernism generally reject, with Pound, “the slough of philology” – those “rags of morphology, epigraphy, *privatleben* and the kindred delights of the archaeological or ‘scholarly mind’” (Pound 1910, v). The hell-bent crime of “obscuring the texts with philology” – Pound’s charge in Canto xiv – reminds us that the word is under heavy suspicion. Students of a materialist approach have had a similar revulsion from philology, construed as the study of “dead, written, alien” languages and “isolated, finished, monologic utterances” (Volosinev 1973, 73). An “intrinsic” study of literature such as New Criticism emerges in large part to resist scientific and positivist philologies, and the terse one-paragraph “obituary” of philology, written by Wellek and Warren at the beginning of chapter 4 of *Theory of Literature*, apparently rejects the term as being too “divergent” and various in meaning, but this is a pretext for a strategic encirclement to choke off its influence (Nichols 1996, 66; Wellek and Warren, 1956, 38). Julia Kristeva (1980, 126–27) could not be more dismissive of the philological undertaking in part because its positivist fixing of meaning, and in part by the “obliteration of the density” of both sign and speaking subject. Modern reading strategies, and modernist readings of modernism began by the displacing of the philologist by the literary critic (Guillory 1993, 192–93). But perhaps a “philology” that enhances the understanding of the social density of both sign and subjectivity can be constructed.

For philology begins, etymologically, in “love of words” and their density; the method examines what words do contextually, what they gather up, what they layer, how they are gapped and positioned syntactically, and what is suggested by specific structural trajectories. As Karl Uitti has observed in his history of philology, the development of a high

level of critical and textual philology (in editing, for instance) and the Victorian use of texts and documents as primary to the human sciences offers the stances of intellectual “skepticism” and interest in “particulars” that are part of the discipline I propose (Uitti 1994: 567–74). When in “What is the history of literature?” Jonathan Arac (1995) tries to balance the dialectical claims of the political and literary, the national and aesthetic (29), he hints that a repositioning reassessment of the tasks summarized by the word “philology” would not be amiss (24–25). To claim back an enhanced and modified philology is one motive for this book.<sup>23</sup> I use the word *philology* in order to sum up a concern for the textures and fibers of poetic language, for the “detail of composition,” “the events of form,” the “deployment of artifice,” for “the remainder.”

A social philology claims that social materials (both specific and general politics, attitudes, subjectivities, ideologies, discourses, debates) are activated and situated within the deepest texture of, the sharpest specificities of, the poetic text: on the level of word choice, crypt word, impacted etymologies, segmentivity and line break, the stanza, the image, diction, sound, genre, the “events” and speakers selected inside the work (enounced), and the rhetorical tactics of the thing on the page (enunciation). All the materials of the signifier are susceptible of a topical/topographic reading in a social philology. The attentiveness that poetry excites is a productive way to engage ideologies and contradictions in texts, while honoring the depth and complexity of poetry as an intensive genre. So by a social philology, I mean an application of the techniques of close reading to reveal social discourses, subjectivities negotiated, and ideological debates in a poetic text.

In this articulation of the word “social” with the word “philology,” I must, with all respect, keep this position distinct from the “return to philology,” proposed in 1982 by Paul de Man. His essay, in part an intra-Crimson struggle, enlists the New Critical, pragmatic practice of “reading texts closely as texts” by Reuben Brower as a literary engagement comparable to the later poststructuralist theory that de Man defends from Walter Jackson Bate (de Man 1986, 23). How can close reading and poststructuralism possibly coincide? They are both seen by de Man as pre-ideological, since “in practice, the turn to theory occurred as a return to philology, to an examination of the structure of language prior to the meaning it produces” (24). But it is unreasonable to seek that moment “prior to meaning,” or even to claim to have found it, since any such moment is already filled with expectations and practices. It is a tempting, if impossible emptiness. Rather than postulate that

there exists any blank spot prior to meaning, or claim the critic as *tabula rasa* upon whom language simply wields its witchcraft, I would hardly be alone in assuming that a “rhetoric and a poetics” can never be “prior to a hermeneutics and a history” (25, 26). What I would therefore mean by a “social philology” is precisely the opposite of de Man’s wish that close reading can be separated from social inscriptions. Instead, as Terry Eagleton has noted with reference to Walter Benjamin, any “individual phenomenon [of text] is grasped in all of its overdetermined complexity as a kind of cryptic code or riddling rebus to be deciphered, a drastically abbreviated image of social processes which the discerning eye will persuade it to yield up” (Eagleton 1990, 329).

Social philology draws on pragmatic cultural materialist analyses identifying debates, discourses, and relationships sedimented in formal features of poems in the “sociological poetics” that Bakhtin/Medvedev propose in *The Formal Method in Literary Scholarship: a Critical Introduction to Sociological Poetics* (Eagleton and Milne 84; Bakhtin and Medvedev 1978, 140).<sup>24</sup> This perspective first insists that all authorship participates in the creation and extension of ideology, but that formalist critics correctly articulated the key issue: “How, within the unity of the artistic construction, is the direct material presence of the work, its here and now, to be joined with the endless perspectives of its ideological meaning?” (Bakhtin/Medvedev 118). The mediating concept to link “the material presence of the word with its meaning” is “social evaluation” (119). Every utterance articulates values and evaluations; each word choice is filled with social understandings; conventions are read through the map of prior uses; discourses are not static but have different valences in changing historical location and function.

In a key formulation: “Every concrete utterance is a social act. At the same time that it is an individual material complex, a phonetic, articulatory, visual complex, the utterance is also part of social reality . . . When the poet selects words, their combination, and their compositional arrangement, [s/he] selects, combines, and arranges the [social] evaluations lodged in them as well” (Bakhtin/Medvedev 1978, 120, 123).<sup>25</sup> Note the emphasis on agency of the maker. Evaluation involves judgment motivated by an implicit argument or debate; choices have complex motivations, including struggles, resistances, confrontations. The acts of selection and combination (rhetorical and intellectual activities creating the poem) that Roman Jakobson pinpoints are already social and ideologically motivated practices.<sup>26</sup> This evocation and arrangement of social evaluations (ideologies, assumptions, judgments)



inside specific words and syntaxes are cues to historical discourses and debates. These emerge in a poetic text not only in theme (signified) but also in technique and rhetoric (signifier), not only as *communication*, but also as *inscription* (Venuti 1995, 312). And, as Bakhtin and Medvedev intimate, not only words, but any textual forms used in poetry – line break, diction/word choice, imagery, syntax, stanza organization, punctuation, spaces – could be analyzed as the arrangement of social evaluation. This enhanced kind of close reading with culturalist aims is what I mean by a “social philology.”

A social philology is also informed by the poetics of the detail in Walter Benjamin. His poetics of the detail is, perhaps, too deictic for explanatory critical practice, given its ecstatic apostrophe to simply showing or exhibiting the odd bits of matter (with an end, in Benjamin, of constructing a montage of citations). His moving call to examine “the trivia, the trash” is, however, evocative and inspires the politics of my critical practice: a philological look at signifiers, in order to “build up the large constructions out of the smallest, precisely fashioned structural elements,” although I shall be agnostic as to whether the critic can or should “detect the crystal of the total event in the analysis of the small, individual moment” (Smith 1989, 48).<sup>27</sup> Benjamin’s “dialectical images” that “define both the form and the content of historical knowledge” (as Richard Sieburth explains) are part of the inspiration for such a study (Sieburth 1989, 19).

A social philology will attempt to articulate the layering of ideological nuance in particular statements in poems; it can do this by attention to the historical discourses that poetry summarizes, condenses, and arranges. Social philology is, then, also indebted to a British and materialist practice of close reading later absorbed into a more neutralized United States New Criticism, excluding, pedagogically, issues of context, biography, discursive formations, and even notably, overt political/ideological statement, at least from the pedagogy of reading texts.<sup>28</sup> That is, such a work as William Empson’s *The Structure of Complex Words* (1951) suggests, with its enlargement of the Freudian sense of condensation, that words can indicate “compacted doctrine” as if they were the presenting symptoms of certain social histories that had been squeezed tight within them, and whose implications and resonances create the aura of meaning (39). It is clearly true that such a method – itself poised febrilely between the social and the aesthetic – would want to seek precisely the way poetic forms (and not simply statements in poetry) become sources of knowledge, the ways poems become acts of cognition.<sup>29</sup>

Adorno's essay "Lyric poetry and society" notes that that in every poem the relationship of subjectivity in its historical form to society in its historical form can be found (1991 42/1974 61). (He says in the lyric; I shall now silently expand, possibly against his intent, and use the word *poem*.) The relationship of subjectivity to historical moment is crystallized as "a social antagonism"; that is, social debates and cultural narratives pressured through and pressuring a subjectivity speak through the poem as texture (1991 45/1974 63). "Thematic elements" and "formal elements" interpenetrate; "it is only by virtue of such interpenetration that the lyric poem actually captures the historical moment within its bounds" (1991 46/1974 65).<sup>30</sup> Because form helps to produce the poem's historical information such materialist analyses must, in Adorno's words "lead not away from the work of art but deeper into it" (1991 38/1974 56).

The essays of Antony Easthope offer a penetrating encapsulation of the issues of subjectivity in poetry. Easthope articulates, drawing on Roman Jakobson, an apparently stolid, but potentially flexible, staging of four points in the poem's makeup to which I shall have occasion to turn (Easthope 1983, 42–47; see Jakobson 1971, 133–35). These are the narrated event(s) inside the poem, that is, the poem's diegesis, and the speaker of and participants in these events (any characters and pronouns inside the poem). In the somewhat weighty terminology applied, this set is called, respectively, the enounced ("narrated event") and the subjectivity of the enounced. Then one turns to the whole speech act or speech event as a work or text within language – what one might call the extradiegetic, the thing on the page. Following Easthope and Jakobson, this is sometimes called the enunciation. This may be anything about the poem aside from its interior action; it might be a stanza break, or a pun. There is also a "participant of the speech event . . . whether addresser or addressee" (Jakobson 1971, 133). The semi-imaginary person articulating the total statement as object is called by Easthope the subjectivity of the enunciation; I am not just willfully trying to avoid the simple word "poet," but trying to honor fabrications and productions, the dramatic construction of voicing made in any individual poem. Further no poet uses all of herself in a particular poem; that portion that speaks is the subjectivity of the enunciation. In many poems, there is a confluence between the subjectivity of the enounced and of the enunciation, as the poem's speaker (inside the diegesis) seems to be the poet making the words of the enunciation. Easthope sees this confluence as creating the humanist illusion of personable presence – a poet really speaking to us directly.

Presumably, but temporarily, the subjectivity of the enunciation was once some part of the poem's author, but in the actual processes of repeated reading, the author is not crucial. Easthope follows Jakobson and Benveniste in extending that privilege of enunciation to the reader/addressee, that is, to whomever produces that work by reading it in the present, a present that is always alive, potential, and shifting. This privileging of the reader is of special interest to Easthope, as it indicates his commitment to the specificity and historicity of reception. However, it comes at a cost, the relative loss to this theory of the social subject as author, the loss of the first creator of the signifieds. There is agency within discourse and ideology, within a social space acting to make any particular poem as such; there is, I mean, agency that produces in the first place what used to be called the "speaker" or "persona" of the poem and here would have (antiseptically) to be called the subjectivity of the enunciation. And there is a third space – the subjectivity of the agent making the work, itself not necessarily coterminous with the subjectivity of the enunciation. Further, as Lawrence Venuti has argued in his closely reasoned elucidation of the mechanisms and politics of "symptomatic reading," any materialist reading necessitates a theory of subjectivity that does not hold the author to being "determined" but also "determining" in relation to material conditions and the medium (1989, 4–7).

But Easthope is rather disinterested in individuals as authors. He is emphatic on the rejection of "the unnecessary and impossible search for a transcendental subject – the 'real man' 'behind' the text" (Easthope 1987, 122); this is presented as an attack on the humanist privileging of "presence" in Easthope's "Poetry and the politics of reading" (1982, 140–41). Yet not all (authorial) subjectivities producing texts aspire to unified, ahistorical, universalizing subjectivity; they just, let us say, aspire to some positions that function validly, that have necessity. Hence, while hardly claiming "real" anyone as its findings, this book will not deemphasize agency so forcefully as *Poetry as Discourse* does by its concerted attack on biographical impressionism and by its post-Foucauldian burial of individual authorship.<sup>31</sup> First, for me, discourses and thematic statements are not freefloating atmospheres (unattached to situation), but are tools, sometimes quickly, and even contradictorily, grabbed by persons, whether in the spirit of intellectual system or of bricolage. I maintain interest in agency and authorial choice: the "career of that struggle" constructs authorship as ongoing struggle with the social materials forming authors and their production, and forming reception and dis-

semination, as well as a struggle with the materials of the text, including the semiotic materials semiconsciously emerging (DuPlessis 1986).<sup>32</sup> Indeed, “dead author” or “author function” claims seem to be made precisely to ignore the social and material relations of literary production, the issues of dissemination and reception that are foregrounded by feminist, ethnic and other materialist social criticism. The “dead author” claim is a way for the critic to avoid noticing or commenting on those relationships of dissemination that still make certain texts, like Orwell’s famous pigs, more hegemonic than others. In any event, writing is made by the engagements and choices of people who, with various motivations, conscious and unconscious, create speaking figures and subject positions, who propose in their work (to echo Fredric Jameson’s extension of Marianne Moore) imaginary solutions to real and invented conflicts, doing so precisely by concerted choices, mixes, articulations, and appropriations of words, syntaxes, and discourses.

An example of a reading based on these principles might look at Countee Cullen’s “Incident” from his first book *Color* (1925). The poem is a three-quatrain ballad about the trauma of racial naming for a child.<sup>33</sup> The title word means event, but an event contingent upon or related to another, one small or minor occurrence which implicates or precipitates a public crisis. The word is used precisely to link personal and political meaning; the personal meaning is the blanking out, or blocking out, from memory of any other thing that happened one summer in Baltimore, once the decisive rupture of happiness has occurred by the ferocity of the white gaze. The political trauma is blanking or blocking because of blacking. Because it means “something contingent upon or related to something else,” the title also links the subjects of the enounced (two boys) and the narrated incident inside the poem with the subjectivity of enunciation, creating only a “minor” poem.

The poem presents the blow of social learning of one’s place in a racial/racist order, a moment discussed in many autobiographical and fictional materials – by Zora Neale Hurston, W. E. B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson – as a turning point for black children. This moment is usually unmarked in white writing. Cullen’s central quatrain proposes the equality of the children in size, demeanor, and in age, indeed, in every way but one. The stanza, as is well known, contains a notable insult, as it moves from smile, to rude tongue gesture layering “poke” as thrust and “poke” as a blow struck, finally to a name calling that interpellates both children into the racial system of the U.S., to the despair of the one and the satisfaction of the other. When the word

“nigger” is spoken, it is carefully quoted from the white child; it is not in free indirect discourse. Cullen has engineered a pause before the decisive word, to call our attention to its being spoken (it is capitalized), to freeze-frame it. This moment of racialization is a sociopolitical equivalent of oedipalization, for it creates two unequal racial castes from polyvalent children, as oedipalization creates two gender castes. The space issues of the central quatrain further represent this social inequality: each child owns one of the first two lines, but in the second two lines of the quatrain, the black child then only possesses a hemistich, while the white child takes up a line and a half. This stanza emphasizes the narrated event (the enounced), and the other subjectivity of the enounced (“I”) has been fixed by the derogatory word of the white child (Easthope 1983, 42). But the poem, as an enunciation (speech event created by Cullen), struggles against this derogatory term, by offering a different speaking subject, one in retrospective control of the narrated event. Cullen does so by proposing, in the texture of the poem as enunciation, a suggestive confrontation of the overt, low word “nigger” and the more muted, elegant one, “whit.”

The word “whit” examined by a social philology is the point at which cross both lateral metonymic associations and a vertical semantic coring to make a sedimented argument against the subjectivity ascribed to the African-American child. The word means a particle or iota: one child is not a bit bigger than the other – they are equals in size. The word is a variant of “wight,” which means a person or human creature. Hence the buried narrative or crypt narrative that etymology offers in whit/wight is the affirmation of the full personhood and equality of both children denied by the incident. Additionally, “wight” means “valor” or bravery, a meaning that evokes the ethical evaluations of courage/cowardice at play here, especially insofar as valor for the black child may involve (unspoken, unnarrated) repression of the urge to fight or answer back, leading perhaps to an anger or pain so intense as to create a trauma of memory. Hence this incident is all that the speaker remembers of this sojourn.

Horizontally, “whit” also irresistibly suggests both “white” and “wit.” Though the white child is no whit bigger (and no bigger in “wit” – another connotive slide), his social power gives him a bigger impact. To describe *white* as socially bigger than its obnoxious rhyme word, although no whit/wit personally or morally larger is indeed a compressed political allegory tamped into the word choice, the rhyme choice, and the finality of the quatrains. The negative word, offering a subject place for

African-Americans, was, incidentally, common enough in white writing in this period, including in works by Carl Van Vechten, Sherwood Anderson, Mina Loy, Carl Sandburg, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, Louis Zukofsky, and many others; its dangerous impact on African-Americans is registered in a poem countering the epithet with brave black heroes – Frank Horne’s “Nigger: A Chant for Children.” In this reading of Cullen’s “whit,” I hunted shadow words “behind” the statement, coring down into etymologies, pursuing metonymic associations, sound shifts, and denotive auras, reading visual suggestions, and identifying the narratives and metaphors buried in the texture of a work that allowed for a simple, belittled subjectivity of the enounced and a fierce, proud, judgmental subjectivity of the enunciation. These readings of the signifier (by association, etymology, syntax, connotation, denotation, segmental position) in relation to the discursive and political field is some of what I mean by social philology. It is allegorically appropriate that my poetics of the detail has been exemplified by a word – “whit” – that means particle or iota, and has involved allusion to a very derogatory word – indicating that words and their “social evaluations” are no small matter.

A second example of a reading based on a social philology draws on Gertrude Stein’s “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene” (written in 1908–10 or 1911; published in 1922), a work of resounding poetic prose repetitions.<sup>34</sup> “She was gay there, not gayer and gayer, just gay there, that is to say she was not gayer by using the things she found there that were gay things, she was gay there, always she was gay there” (Stein 1993, 255; Stein 1962, 564). The much repeated word “gay,” with its condensed, implosive meanings brought under the scrutiny of a social philology, suggests three directions, three discourses, three possibilities, and the open pathways between them; all involve seeking pleasure and all are sexually suggestive. These meanings are not sortable and remain in permanent slippage across the work, by conscious manipulation on Stein’s part.

The first meaning of “gay” is mirthful, charming, brilliant, showy, joyous; this is also the meaning of the word *gai* in French, a language on which Stein repeatedly draws for everything from verbal nuances to translinguistic puns. Women become “gay” as they enter social space and leave the dour family house, a site emphatically “not gay.” Department stores attract them, shopping and the urbane pleasures of city life are enticing. As women, they are supposed to be gay: not too serious about “cultivating” their talents, but consciously cultivating their decorative flair, their consumerist bent, their personal pleasure.

In “cultivated” Stein takes up the question of work for women. *Cultivate* is a term with two prongs – toward tilling the soil, and toward educational refinement and formation. The women never became professionals in their cultivation: “The voice Georgine Skeene was cultivating she did not cultivate too much. She cultivated it quite some. She cultivated and she would sometime go on cultivating it and it was not then an unpleasant one . . .” (Stein 1993a, 256; 1962, 564). The flux of the diction – between “not too much” and “quite some” and “go on cultivating,” and then the creating of “a quite richly enough cultivated one” – does suggest that some debate about female professionalism has been encoded as a socially shifting condition. How much effort is consistent with personal pleasure, with not being bored, with being part of a community in which “there were many cultivating something,” with the possibility of working further to perfection are questions all in flux (Stein 1993a, 256, also 257).

The second, related, meaning of “gay” (dating from about 1885, well within early “New Woman” discourse) is fast or sexually active. The “gay life” was a euphemism for prostitution, or, softened, for a sexually active life without marriage, as in “gay divorcée” or “Gay Paris,” the city of sexual access; a “gay blade” or “gay dog” is used as an indicator of a male seducer or gallant. This meaning of the word “gay” is someone (gender unspecific) who conducts a nonmarital sexual life, but the word has a special punch when applied to women, for it indicates sexual promiscuity as opposed to some understood sexual standard of (premarital) chastity and/or (postmarital) monogamy. The culture of sexuality, sexual expressiveness, sexual experimentation, and sexual knowledge grew in general importance in the early twentieth century; the “modernization of sex” was a remarked upon phenomenon: “the modernists were sexual enthusiasts” (Evans 1989, 160–61; Robinson 1976, 3). This second meaning of gay as (probably hetero)sexual liberation is drawn in a section in which Miss Furr and Miss Skeene “sat with . . . dark and heavy” men: “They were regular then, they were gay then, they were where they wanted to be then where it was gay to be then, they were regularly gay then” (Stein 1993, 257; 1962, 565). This second use of the word “gay” marks public displays of sexuality – lack of chaperones, sexual expressiveness, seduction rituals, brazen behaviors.

The third meaning of “gay” is homosexual, a thoroughly plausible, if not thoroughly provable, denotation.<sup>35</sup> It is difficult to identify beyond doubt whether this usage is applicable to a work written in 1911, with dictionaries drawn up within the gay community dating the word rather